

Little Change Seen in Iranian-Iraqi Fighting

By Jonathan C. Randal
Washington Post Foreign Service

KUWAIT, Feb. 14—Fierce fighting raged again today as Iraq, for the fifth successive day, sought to dislodge Iranian invaders from the Faw Peninsula at the mouth of the strategic Shatt al Arab waterway.

But sources with access to satellite photographs discounted contradictory Iraqi and Iranian victory claims and said there appeared to be little change on the ground.

Iraq's military communiques said its forces destroyed Iranian reinforcements before they were able to cross the Shatt al Arab to the Faw pocket, apparently on small boats and pontoon bridges at night.

The Iranians said they repulsed three overnight Iraqi counterattacks south of Basra and were inching north toward that city, about 60 miles north of Faw.

With the outcome still in the balance in the Faw Peninsula facing the Persian Gulf, Iraq launched a "surprise attack" in the marshes near the Majnoun Islands, about 30 miles north of Basra.

The Iraqis' military communiques said their troops had "totally annihilated Iranian forces" and retaken several square miles of the man-made islands that were built in the 1970s to exploit the estimated 8 billion barrels of oil reserves they cover.

Military analysts suggested that the Iraqi drive there was designed to keep off balance the hundreds of thousands of Iranian troops reportedly poised for a major offensive that Baghdad fears is imminent.

The analysts pointed out that satellite photographs showed that the Iraqis had diverted relatively few troops from that sector in their efforts to drive the Iranians out of the Faw Peninsula.

In fact, Iranian military communiques claimed that the Iraqi presidential guard division, normally stationed in and around the capital, Baghdad, was "put to flight" after being sent to the Faw front overnight. The guard was used as a strategic reserve last March in smashing Iranian forces that had crossed the Hawizah marshes and occupied positions on the western bank of the Tigris River and the nearby Baghdad-to-Basra highway.

Military analysts suggested that Iraq's massive edge in warplanes, helicopter gunships, armor and heavy artillery should allow it to wear down and eventually destroy the Iranian invaders in the Faw area.

"If the Iraqis just take their time and do not politically embarrass and panic themselves into drawing units from north of Basra," one analyst remarked, "they should be able to clean the Iranians up."

He pointed to a statement by the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations as indirect evidence that the Iranians were stymied.

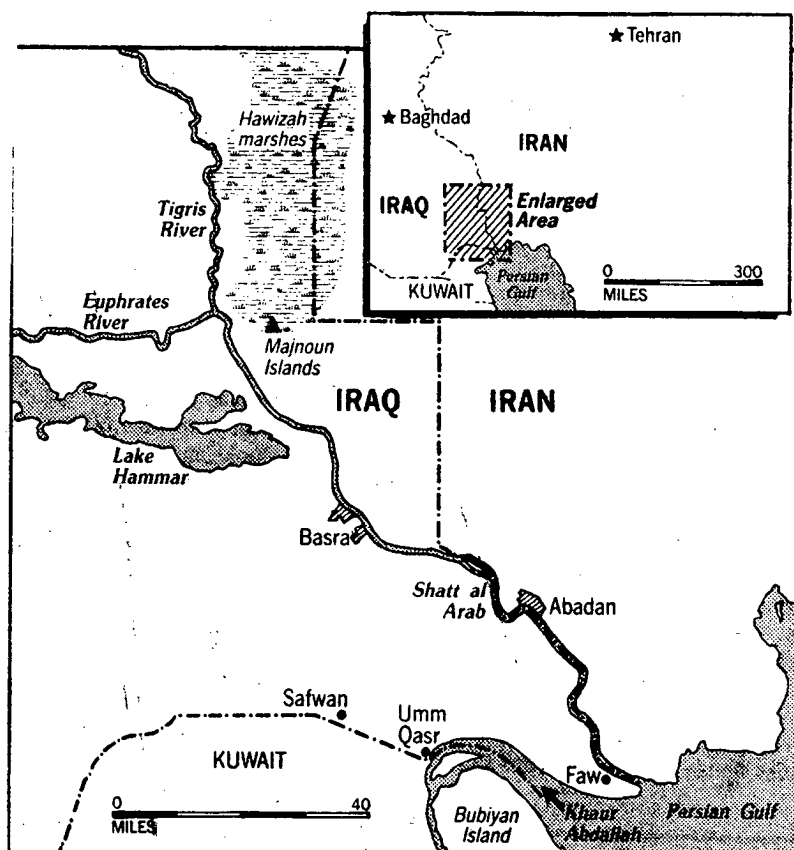
Ambassador Said Rajaie Khorrasani pledged that Tehran's troops had achieved their objectives in Faw and were not interested in carrying the war to Kuwait or other conservative Arab states on the western shores of the Persian Gulf.

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of Tehran's parliament, told reporters on Monday that Iran's political goal in the Faw fighting was to persuade states adjacent to Iraq to "accept the principle of removing [Iraqi President] Saddam Hussein."

But even those analysts convinced that Iran seeks to capture Basra say they believe that the invaders may settle for cutting communication in southern Iraq. Severing Iraqi road traffic with Kuwait, whose port handles Iraqi-bound cargos, would require occupying the border town of Safwan, about 50 miles west of Faw.

Although Iran claimed that its forces, apparently protected by artillery on the eastern side of the Shatt al Arab, had repulsed three Iraqi counterattacks south of Basra, satellite photographs showed no further Iranian advance along the Khaur Abdallah waterway opposite Kuwait's Bubiyan Island.

Analysts speculated that the Iranians would lay themselves open to Iraqi air attack if they moved across the sandy, unprotected country to attack the Soviet-built Umm Qasr naval base, the last Iraqi stronghold east of Safwan.



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